Stimmung: exploring the aesthetics of mood

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Abstract

Few cinephiles would deny the importance of mood in film, yet the aesthetics of mood are curiously overlooked today. On the one hand, mood is an essential dimension of cinema: we define certain genres, for example, by suggesting the moods they evoke (suspense, the thriller, the romance). On the other hand, words frequently fail us when we try to articulate such moods in a more abstract or analytical vein. I offer in this essay some critical reflections on the significance of mood, suggesting that mood works in narrative film by the disclosure of cinematic worlds. To explore variations in the aesthetics of mood — what I call disclosive, episodic, transitional and autonomous moods — I shall consider some selected mood-sequences from Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005), Fa yeung nin wa/In the Mood for Love (Wong Kar-wai, 2000), Habla con ella/Talk to Her (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002) and Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, 2001). My aim is to suggest the virtues of taking a more phenomenological approach to the aesthetics of mood, understood as a way of revealing or opening up a cinematic world; and to show how mood, in revealing distinctive cinematic worlds, is essential to our aesthetic and emotional engagement with film.

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Articles

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I offer in this essay some critical reflections on the significance of mood, suggesting that mood works in narrative film by the disclosure of *cinematic worlds*. A 'cinematic world' is much more than a vague metaphor suggesting an imaginative construction; it has a visual complexity and symbolic consistency that justifies its designation as a 'world'. As Victor Perkins argues, the complex composition of a film world – with its particular presentation of visual detail and tacit norms granting sense to what we see – provides an encompassing fictional setting in which the film's dramatic performances and narrative elements take on a particular style and meaning.[2] My contention is that moods always reveal or express a cinematic world, and that distinctive cinematic worlds have their own specific kinds of mood. To explore variations in the aesthetics of mood – what I call disclosive, episodic, transitional and autonomous moods – I shall consider some selected mood-sequences from *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), *Fa yeung nin wa*/*In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-wai, 2000), *Habla con ella/Talk to Her* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002) and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001). My aim is to suggest the virtues of taking a more phenomenological approach to the aesthetics of mood, understood as a way of revealing or opening up a cinematic world; and to show how mood, in revealing distinctive cinematic worlds, is essential to our aesthetic and emotional engagement with film.

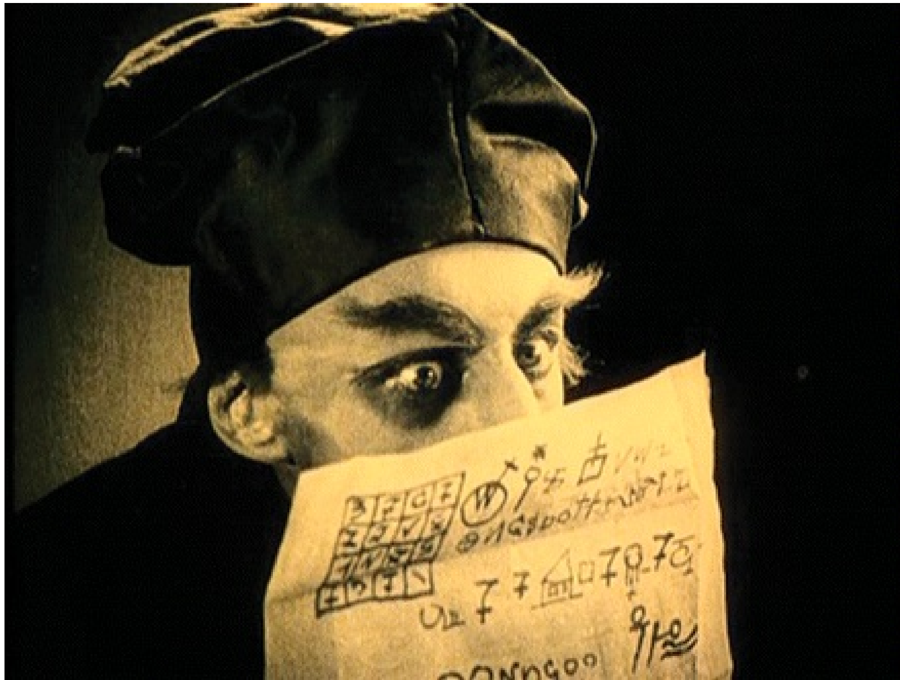
Despite its neglect in anglophone film-philosophy and film theory, mood has long been recognized as important to film aesthetics, especially by early filmmakers and film theorists. The great German critic and film historian Lotte H. Eisner, for example, frequently used the term *Stimmung* (meaning mood, attunement or atmosphere) to capture the expressionist style of 1920s German silent film.[3]*Stimmung*, for Eisner, citing the German romantic poet Novalis, evokes a 'musical condition of the soul', encompassing both 'psychical acoustics and the harmony of vibrations'; an atmosphere elicited principally by the expressionist play of light and shadow.[4] Spanning both visual style and aesthetic response, *Stimmung* is a 'metaphysical accord' that 'hovers around objects as well as people'; it names 'a mystical and singular harmony amid the chaos of things, a kind of sorrowful nostalgia mixed with wellbeing, an imprecise nuance of nostalgia, languor coloured with desire, lust of body and soul'.[5] This peculiarly atmospheric visual style captures well the mood of expressionist cinema, with its stark use of shadow and light, sublime landscapes, and melancholy characters on the verge of despair. *Stimmung* encompasses both the expressiveness of the film and the affective responsiveness of the viewer: it designates an expressive presentation of a world of singular individuals, places and things imbued with aesthetic significance.

In *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924), Béla Balázs also discusses *Stimmung* or 'atmosphere' as a distinctive feature of film.[6] Drawing on nineteenth-century art history, Balázs described it as an 'objectified lyricism', arguing, as Janet Ward remarks, 'that silent film required the

conjuring of *Stimmung*, otherwise we would simply have bare descriptions of characters or events'.[7] It is not the narrative content per se but rather the aesthetic dimensions of the image – its giving of life and expression to human figures, spaces and material things – that are essential to the experience of *Stimmung*. What this suggests is something that has been more or less forgotten today: that there is a dimension of film theory – *Stimmung* or the aesthetics of mood – concerned with the *expressive* aspects of the image (what Epstein and Morin called *photogenie*). Echoing Eisner, Balázs too emphasized the link between cinematic aesthetics, the revealing of a meaningful fictional world, and subjective responsiveness. *Stimmung*, for Balázs, is 'the soul of every art', the 'air and the aroma that pervade every work of art, and that lend distinctiveness to a medium and a world'.[8] In the cinema, *Stimmung* refers to the power of the image to evoke atmosphere or mood, whether through action, gesture or facial expressiveness – or the vivid life of material objects that conjure up a world, revealing the dense materiality of a milieu.[9] From this point of view, *Stimmung* defines a properly cinematic aesthetic with the power to evoke atmosphere or to disclose an experience of world imbued with subtle varieties of mood.

This concept has an illustrious heritage in the history of film. To cite a classic example, a number of sequences in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) capture well what Eisner and Balázs describe as *Stimmung*. In one memorable sequence – the arrival of young estate agent Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim) at Count Orlok's (Max Schreck) castle – we feel the aesthetic power of *Stimmung* in action. Hutter has arrived at the gloomy castle after a long journey, the last part in a riderless, black-swathed coach. As he enters the castle grounds he sees the Count, ashen-faced, emerging slowly from a darkened archway, hands like claws folded high against his chest. It is approaching midnight and Hutter is hungry after his long journey. In the bare and empty castle, marked by fringing shadows and harsh light, he eats the simple supper the Count has prepared. A close shot, from above and to the side, shows Count Orlok, his face half-illuminated, hidden behind a letter marked with strange hieroglyphics, now coming into view, his vulpine eyebrows arched and eyes blazing, as though roused to life by Hutter's slicing of the bread (figure 1).

Fig. 1.



Stimmung: Count Orlok (Max Schreck) in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).

A gothic clock, its skeletal grim reaper casting a ghastly shadow against the wall, begins to chime midnight. Unnerved by the clock's chime and the Count's hypnotic stare, Hutter cuts his thumb on the bread knife, revealing a thick drop of blood. The count springs up, drawn to Hutter's wound. ‘You've hurt yourself … the precious blood!’, he cries, as Hutter reels in horror, slowly backing away. The Count's slow but inexorable movements lend the scene a mesmerizing and suffocating air, a mood well reflected in Hutter's stunned facial expression and evident bodily paralysis. He is now under the Count's sway, his body obeying the Count's demands, his will bent to the inexorable drive of the vampire's bloodlust. Murnau's remarkable use of shadow and light, his slowing down of dramatic tempo, highlighting of striking objects (knife, eyes, blood), and eliciting of almost automaton-like gestures imbue this sequence with its hypnotic atmosphere of dread. The various musical scores used to accompany the uncanny images of Nosferatu (there have been several) clearly also heighten and modify the variations of mood within this famous sequence. Without eliciting the appropriate moods of suspense, dread and fascinated revulsion the scene would simply fall flat, appearing trite or ridiculous, as often happens with less artful horror films. This fascination with cinematic *Stimmung* – speaking of Lang and Murnau, Eisner describes the play of light and shadow, an atmosphere of chiaroscuro, lingering clouds of smoke, penumbral shadows, ghostly apparitions[10] – has been inherited by a variety of genres such as film noir and horror, but also features in the work of contemporary auteurs including Michael Haneke, David Lynch, Béla Tarr and Lars von Trier.

Despite these illustrious predecessors, the aesthetics of mood (and the concept of *Stimmung*) have featured little in recent film theory.[11] While there has been intense interest in emotion and affect, mood has been largely ignored.[12] Cognitivist theories of emotion, narrative and genre, for example, tend to focus on character engagement, narrative content and the role of cognition in our understanding of film. Noël Carroll argues that we can explain the puzzle of emotional convergence – that viewers typically respond in similar ways to particular movie scenes – by the 'criterial prefocusing' of narrative cues that elicit and direct appropriate affective and emotional responses.[13] Carl Plantinga, who in his account of 'affective prefocusing' emphasizes the interplay of cognitive, emotional and generic factors, also foregrounds the role of character, action and narrative content in his analyses of spectator emotional engagement.[14] For both Carroll and Plantinga it is our cognitive engagement with 'prefocused' narrative and emotional cues – the way our affective responses to characters' actions are triggered and shaped via familiar emotion-cues and social scripts within prototypical narrative situations – that explains film's capacity to evoke a convergence of emotional responses in viewers.[15]

One criticism of this approach, however, is that it overlooks the specifically aesthetic and expressive aspects of narrative film. It is not just character action and narrative content that elicit emotion, it is the entire repertoire of cinematic–aesthetic devices (lighting, mise-en-scene, montage, rhythm, tempo, colour, texture, gesture, performance, music and sound) that together contribute to the expression of a film's style and meaning. Emotion is elicited and communicated aesthetically, with feeling, sensibility and reflection, as well as cognitively. We can be attuned or responsive to films in ways that are not principally oriented towards a goal, focused on grasping narrative content or on cognitive comprehension. Indeed, we can have quite distinctive responses, depending on whether we are concerned with the represented aspect of the fictional world (narrative content) or its expressive aspect (how aspects of the fictional world are revealed aesthetically). I can readily understand that the concluding sequence of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) represents the revelation of the final word that Kane utters on his deathbed; but it is the expressive manner of the sequence's presentation – its combination of anonymous grandeur and meaningless accumulation, all the inscrutable traces and material detritus of a man's life – that raises the question of whether we, or anyone, can fathom the meaning of 'Rosebud'.[16] Moreover, films do not simply present characters in discrete emotional states in order to convey narrative information. Rather, their aesthetic effect depends on the sensuous–affective background or encompassing 'mood' against which our complex flow of emotional responsiveness becomes manifest: the background against which we are able to recognize, align and ally ourselves with particular characters within specific

narrative scenarios.

A welcome exception to the widespread neglect of mood in film theory is Greg M. Smith's *Film Structure and the Emotion System*.[17] Although not concerned with film aesthetics as such, Smith develops an impressive theory that foregrounds the role of mood in explaining the emotional appeal of film. As Smith points out, it is not quite correct to say that films ‘make’ people feel; rather, they extend an ‘invitation to feel in particular ways’, an invitation that the viewer is free to accept or reject.[18] Accepting a film's invitation is to accept some of the generic ‘rules’ or conventions – and emotional scripts or prototypical scenarios – that come into play in the presentation of film narrative. For such an invitation to work effectively, however, requires a suitably educated viewer capable of interpreting the appropriate ‘emotion cues’ that sustain particular affective and emotional responses (to generic expectations, stylistic conventions, familiar character traits, dramatic development, and so on). At the same time viewers, whether educated or not, show a remarkable degree of ‘emotional convergence’ around similar scenes, despite their variable background knowledge of film, their psychological dispositions, critical faculties and aesthetic tastes. How is this possible?

As an alternative to Carroll's ‘criterial prefocusing’ approach, Smith argues that film narrative works to achieve emotional engagement – and explain emotional convergence – by the cueing and sustaining of *moods*: diffuse yet extended non-intentional affective states, which dispose us towards having the kind of emotional responses invited by the narrative. Indeed, ‘the primary emotive effect’ of cinema, Smith argues, is ‘to create mood’.[19] Mood provides a focusing of affective attunement that is necessary for the successful convergence of a particular viewer's emotional responses to specific scenes or narrative sequences. Smith thereby challenges the prevailing orthodoxy, evident in recent cognitivist work on affect and emotion, that mood is a minor feature of our aesthetic experience of film. Such approaches, evident in many contemporary theories, typically focus on character, action and narrative development at the expense of the exploration of mood in aesthetic composition and cinematic style.[20]

The most striking feature of Smith's ‘mood-cue’ approach, by contrast, is its emphasis on the role of moods in the eliciting, focusing and directing of emotional response. Moods prime us either for discrete emotions or else for extended ‘emotion sequences’ taking the form of a mini-narrative linking related emotional states. Indeed, for Smith moods are proto-emotions in that they prime us for emotions proper (which have a definite cognitive object); they prepare us for cognitively oriented emotional responses to relevant features of our environment. Unlike emotions, however, moods are diffuse tendencies towards emotional states; longer lasting than emotions, they prime us for having and repeating

emotions, or clusters of emotional states, with a definite cognitive character.[21] Emotionally coloured cognition, according to this approach, is the teleological end of having moods. Mood and emotion thus tend to work together in synergy; mood priming us for having emotions, while emotional bursts sustain and renew our background mood.[22] To summarize, a mood is an orienting tendency towards discrete emotional states, one that provides a ‘consistency of expectation’ towards emotional stimuli and primes us to select details or cues that are emotionally salient while filtering out or ignoring those that are emotionally irrelevant.[23]

For all its laudable emphasis on its essential role in film, Smith's account of mood is susceptible to challenge from a phenomenological perspective, since his approach still subordinates mood to the discrete emotional states generated in response to character action, narrative situation or generic convention. In this sense it chimes with the prevailing ‘atomized’ account of affective/emotional response to film. According to this approach, mood is a response to available triggers encountered within the environment. We respond to such cues, in piecemeal or mosaic fashion, in order to develop fully-fledged emotions (with a definite object or determinate cognitive content). In relation to film, the viewer experiences moods thanks to his or her encounter with suitably presented mood-cues (music, visual framing, emotion scripts, prototypical scenarios, and so on) which elicit and sustain our emotional, cognitively directed responses to the film's narrative content.

What is missing in this account, however, is the phenomenological basis for our response to relevant ‘mood-cues’ as meaningful phenomena in the first place: how do we apprehend such cues as affectively charged or emotionally evocative when they are context-dependent, variable and, for the most part, insignificant? Some mood-cues, to be sure, are inherently significant, namely those that trigger more or less autonomous affective responses (threats, dangers, visceral or sexual stimuli); but most mood-cues dealing with more complex affective states involve a variety of triggers that only gain significance within a particular aesthetic or narrative context. There is nothing intrinsically disturbing, for example, about a young woman taking a shower, enjoying the sensation of cleansing water on her skin, unless she happens to be in the Bates Motel (*Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960]). That we apprehend Marion Crane's (Janet Leigh) moment of cleansing solitude as suspenseful or anxiety-inducing presupposes that such cues (the shots of Marion undressing, the closeup of the showerhead, the rushing water, the pleasure expressed on Marion's face) are encountered as meaningful within a carefully composed fictional world (figure 2). It is only *Psycho*'s particular evocation of the moods of excitement, pleasure in (sexual and moral) transgression, suspense, anxiety and guilt (thanks to Hitchcock's artful direction and Bernard Herrmann's striking musical score) that ensures Crane's violent death assumes such dramatic intensity. A film-world must be aesthetically disclosed or rendered meaningful *through the evocation of appropriate*

moods in order for such cues to show up as affectively charged with meaning in the first place.

Fig. 2.



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Marion (Janet Leigh) in the shower, in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).

Moods, in other words, contribute to the aesthetic composition of a cinematic world – which is to say how well that world is *achieved*. They are not merely diffuse and variable subjective states, something vague 'within us' with only an arbitrary relationship to the world. Rather, they are expressive of how a (cinematic) world is revealed, of what aspects of such a world might be emotionally significant. They provide a 'baseline' form of attunement that enables certain items within that world to show up as interesting, attractive, significant, disturbing, repellent, perplexing, threatening, fascinating, and so on. Relevant mood-cues are not simply discrete triggers for generating emotional responses in viewers. Rather, they are themselves encountered as meaningful, as emotionally orienting, precisely because of the *expressive manner* in which the film-world has been disclosed through its arrangement and composition. The aesthetic implication of this holistic, rather than atomistic, approach to mood is significant for philosophical film theory. Before focusing on character, action and narrative development, we should be attentive to *how* the particular film-world is aesthetically revealed and how we are affectively attuned to that world, since this is what makes it possible for us to be responsively engaged with what is represented within that world.

In contemporary film theory, however, the 'atomistic' approach (mood is generated 'subjectively' by given mood-cues) rather than the 'holistic' view (mood reveals aspects of

a fictional world in distinctive ways) continues to hold sway. Mood is overlooked in favour of the narrative cueing of discrete emotional responses triggered by character traits, specific objects or narrative scenarios. This tendency to revert to the familiar privileging of character and narrative is evident, for example, in Smith's analyses of filmic examples of the mood-cue approach. His readings of *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), *Stachka*/*Strike* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) or *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), despite their underlining of mood, focus primarily on the emotional markers attached to character development within narrative scenarios (the *what*, or the represented aspects, of the narrative situation), and less on the 'para-narrative' or expressive dimension of cinematic aesthetics (the *how* of that represented fictional world). In his discussion of *Stella Dallas*, for example, Smith rightly draws attention to the restrained but significant use of Alfred Newman's musical score, to the generic ambiguity in the opening parts of the film as to whether it rehearses melodramatic or romantic love story scripts, to the superior emotional knowledge afforded to spectators but withheld from characters, to the social and dramatic significance of Stella's costumes, and so on. At the same time, however, he tends to frame his discussion in relation to the specific content of narrative episodes rather than to the film's unobtrusive but pointed use of visual style (its evocation of certain moods) or the emotional dynamics of Barbara Stanwyck's remarkable performance as Stella, one that arguably carries the aesthetic and dramatic success of the film.

This emphasis on character-related action is entirely understandable given the importance of emotion in dramatic narrative. It does mean, however, that the 'mood-cue' approach, despite its intentions, tends to foreground character action and dramatic situation over, and in isolation from, a variety of equally important dimensions of world-disclosure. If mood, as a form of disclosure, expresses how character action or narrative situations show up as emotionally significant, film analysis or criticism needs to thematize and analyze mood and other 'backgrounded' aspects more carefully. Although moods can serve as cues for orienting discrete emotional responses, they are also forms of background attunement that disclose or express cinematic worlds in ways that allow us to respond to relevant 'mood-cues' in the first place. Mood, in sum, is an expressive way of revealing time and meaning, as well as affectively charged aspects of a (fictional) world.

How does the disclosure of a cinematic world through mood work? There are a number of ways in which moods function in cinematic narrative, the most basic being the 'scene-setting' that opens up a film's fictional world. We can call this the evocation of a *disclosive* mood: a mood that reveals a cinematic world, the 'grounding' mood pervading the film, which attunes us to the various tonal qualities of the narrative, its characters, its generic aspects, and so on. Consider the opening sequence of *Brokeback Mountain*. It begins with sublime images of rows of rolling hills, shrouded in dawn mist, shading off into distant mountain ranges, a lone truck rolling across the landscape in the foreground. An acoustic

guitar sounds a spare, broken, minor melody line, which then resolves in a satisfying major chord. The truck stops in a lonesome town and a man alights, a cowboy who has been hitchhiking through the night. A subtitle frames the social world we are entering: '1963, Signal, Wyoming'. The man makes his way towards a desolate shed and waits; a train passes; he smokes some of his cigarette. After a while, a decrepit pickup arrives, engine sputtering and gears crunching, and another cowboy appears. There is no dialogue between them, merely furtive glances, cigarettes being smoked, hats pushed over brows as they wait in silence. One of them seems interested in the other, observing him through his truck's side mirror, but the other remains impassive. An older, stouter man in a new car arrives; evidently the boss, he ignores the cowboys, and enters the makeshift office before commanding the men to come inside. They are looking for work: their job will to be to oversee the boss's sheep, herding and protecting them as they graze in the high plains. Their employment situation settled, the two men are ordered brusquely out of the door. Only then do they exchange greetings – one of them, Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), seems friendlier than the other, Ennis Delmar (Heath Ledger). They go to a bar and have a beer, the gruff intimacy of masculine exchange. Jack tells of his time in the mountains when forty-two sheep were killed by a lightning strike; Ennis tells of how his parents 'missed' the only bend in the road for forty-three miles and died. A bond, however rough and ready, has been formed.

This opening sequence not only provides a narrative setting, it reveals a complex cinematic world imbued with a certain mood, an atmospheric pathos lending the characters' actions and gestures an expressive sense. This is a world revealed through landscape, gesture, silence and restraint; it expresses toughness and isolation coupled with lyricism and melancholy. Set against a backdrop of vast mountains, empty plains and desolate roads, the characters' inarticulate gestures hint at something more intimate. Bodies are framed in long shot, isolated, set against stark backgrounds; the outdoor light is bright, relentless; the silences and pauses palpable; the film's tempo slows to suggest an uneasy expectation. While shaving in front of his truck's side mirror, Jack looks intently at the reflected image of Ennis standing aloof against the dusty building. Ennis, as though conscious of Jack's gaze, pulls his hat further down over his brow, concealing his face from view. The scene lingers over this non-encounter, eliciting curiosity and expectation as to the nature of the relationship that might unfold between these two men. Had the film presented, more conventionally, Ennis and Jack engaging in gruff cowboy banter, perhaps sharing a cigarette in a manly way, the film's delicate mood of suppressed erotic curiosity, tinged with a note of shame, would have been smothered. It is because of the careful composition of this fictional world, the film's attention to visual framing and backgrounding (moving from vast landscapes to two bodies set awkwardly against an anonymous townscape), and aural mood-setting (combining music and silence), that Jack's and Ennis's tentative glances and gestures become emotionally expressive, setting the

melancholy mood for the love story to follow (figure 3).

Fig. 3.



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Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis (Heath Ledger), in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

In addition to revealing a fictional cinematic world, mood also plays an essential role in the composition, emotional dynamics and dramatic tempo of narrative film. Like musical composition, film narrative consists of ‘movements’ that develop a theme, introduce variations and recapitulate motifs (images, objects, gestures, visual figures or musical themes), thus providing structure and shape while also modulating mood overall. Many films feature musical/performance interludes that vary the mood or shift the emotional dynamics of the narrative. Such interludes can work as a recurring feature of the film's visual and dramatic development. They elicit resonant mood sequences that are repeated, in a recurring or episodic manner, in order to replenish or sustain particular moods (what I call *episodic* moods). Or they can serve as explicit interludes that interrupt the main narrative development, varying the affective tenor or emotional dynamics in preparation for a different narrative sequence or dramatic development to follow (what I call *transitional* moods). Once again, the evocation of mood is a holistic phenomenon that reveals different aspects of a cinematic world rather than a piecemeal process triggered by the apprehension of isolated ‘mood-cues’.

In the Mood for Love, for example, is a strikingly evocative mood piece. It elicits a series of moods from nostalgia (for an idealized, early 1960s Hong Kong), subtle betrayal and melancholy loss, thwarted desire and romantic longing, the fading of memory in the flow

of time, and an undertone of spiritual transcendence amidst the everyday. The film's remarkable colour palette (the modest, cramped apartments are subtly coordinated with olive greens, crimson reds and soft blues), the recurrence of recognizable visual and musical motifs (images of clocks; an aesthetic appreciation of fashion, notably Maggie Cheung's beautiful *cheongsams* and Tony Leung's handsome ties), and poignant use of popular music (Nat King Cole and Bryan Ferry) all attest to its accomplishment as a piece of mood cinema. In addition to evoking artfully the moods of nostalgia, romantic longing and thwarted desire, it offers an unobtrusive reflection on the pleasure of cinematic viewing. As Stephen Teo remarks, ‘What Wong Kar-wai does for an hour and a half is to butter up his audience for two or three levels of mood play: a mood for love, to begin with; but even more substantially, a mood for nostalgia, and a mood for melodrama’.[24] Although some of these moods pervade the film-world as a whole (and so are disclosive moods), waxing and waning depending on the particular narrative development taking place, the film also carefully nourishes its various moods through the use of recurring sequences, often repeating the same actions, gestures and musical motifs, varied subtly by the passage of time and deepening of emotional resonances between characters and viewers.

One such sequence is the repeated use of a haunting musical refrain, ‘Yumeji's theme’ (composed by Shigeru Umabayashi), which accompanies the two main characters, elegant Su Li-zhen and dashing Chow Mo-wan. The recurrence of this refrain, as it accompanies the slow, sensuous everyday encounters between the two – passing each other in the evening on a narrow stairway, time slowed to an elegant waltz, their movements a subtle dance of attraction and restraint as they venture out to fetch the evening rice for dinner – sustains the romantic moods of nostalgia and longing that grant this love story its affective charge (figure 4). At the same time, it is the recurrence of various elements such as colour palette, visual and musical motifs, gestures and expressions in performance, particular fashion and costume combinations, that put into play a series of subtle variations in mood throughout the film.

Fig. 4.



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Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) and Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung) in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

The sequence in question here – Yumeji's theme – achieves its effect thanks to its intriguing structure: a sequence of slow-motion images of the couple's silent encounter on the stairs, rhythmically following the waltz-tempo of the music, a melancholy dance of desire and restraint; and the repetition of this encounter in ‘real time’, the actual encounter being entirely unremarkable, no more than neighbours passing each other on the stairs, marked by a minimal greeting and nothing more. It is via this repetition – the lyrical dance to the music of time and the prosaic encounter of strangers on the street – that the film sustains and replenishes its characteristic mood and world. The everyday and the lyrical, the ordinary and the sublime, are drawn together in this sequence; the two are separated by nothing more than a shift in mood, disclosing a romantic undercurrent, a transcendence, resonating within the most ordinary of encounters.

Moods can serve different purposes within the course of a narrative film. In addition to revealing a world, or sustaining one through the recurring use of sequences, moods can also serve as interruptions to the narrative flow, providing an interlude that prepares a transition to the next narrative movement. A fine example of transitional mood-sequencing can be found in *Talk to Her*. This remarkable combination of melodrama, perverse love story and cinematic reflection on performance (dance, bullfighting, silent film) features a mood-sequence that Cavell might have described as a ‘nothing shot’ – an image or sequence that serves little narrative purpose other than to evoke a shift in mood.[25] There is a brief musical interlude in the course of the film, interrupting the intertwining stories of Benigno (Javier Cámara) and Alicia (Leonor Watling), and Marco (Dario Grandinetti) and Lydia (Rosario Flores). It begins with a gentle guitar accompaniment to the image of a

young man diving into a pool and swimming underwater. His face emerges from the water's surface, beaming into the camera, as the music gently builds. We move to an unknown house, where a large gathering of people are enjoying an artistic social event. They are listening to a singer (Caetano Veloso), accompanied by a guitarist, cellist and bassist, performing a beautiful song (‘Cucurrucucu Paloma’). This evening scene, set in a delightful courtyard, lingers on the singer's performance, his expressive voice and features, and the pleasure on the faces of his audience, including not only the lead characters Marco and Lydia but Almodóvar ensemble actors Cecilia Roth and Marisa Paredes (Manuela and Huma from *Todo sobre mi madre*/*All About My Mother* [2002]). Everyone is enjoying the performance, the singer's exquisite lament, which evokes a poignant romanticism, a sensibility registered on Marco's melancholy face as he is moved, once again, to tears (a recurring motif in the film [figure 5]). Marco leaves the performance, overcome with emotion (as during the film's opening dance performance), followed by Lydia, who is captivated by his overflowing feeling, thus opening a space for their uneasy intimacy to unfold.

Fig. 5.



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Marco (Marío Grandinetti) in Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* (2002).

The scene has little narrative significance other than as an occasion for Marco, the broken journalist, and Lydia, the broken matador, to talk, to recall painful memories (Marco remembers suddenly why he cried after killing a snake in Lydia's apartment, the episode with the snake and the melancholy music having conjured up a memory of having done the same for his former lover). Interrupting the narrative flow with an interlude dedicated to song, performance and aesthetic pleasure, this transitional mood-sequence uses music

and performance to imbue the narrative situation with affective intensity, but also to mark a transition from one part or 'movement' of the film to the next. The sequence commences with a striking image of sensuous pleasure (the beautiful young man smiling from the swimming pool), modulating this mood – thanks to Veloso's performance – into romantic nostalgia and longing before shifting to a different mood at the end of the sequence, one of painful recollection and a darker pathos of loss. Almodóvar's achievement in moving from one end of the mood spectrum to the other is remarkable. The communal experience of pleasure in the song and performance is interrupted by the camera subtly drawing attention to Marco's involuntary emotion and Lydia's rapt fascination. They are both drawn out of and away from the charmed circle of art – Marco leaving abruptly mid performance, followed by a concerned Lydia – and venture into the darker, unknown territory of affective memory – Marco smoking a cigarette and staring off into the darkness, telling Lydia the story of his former lover. The sequence commences with sensuous pleasure in the present but concludes in a minor key with melancholy reminiscences of the past. The transition to the next movement or chapter in Marco and Lydia's story has been carefully prepared, the affective and emotional tone of the film modulated or attuned to a different key.

In addition to disclosive, episodic and transitional mood-sequences, filmmakers can also explore the possibility of autonomous or enveloping moods. These are sequences that are no longer subordinated to setting up a fictional world or sustaining emotionally relevant moods. We find many such sequences in the films of David Lynch, where mood envelops and transfigures narrative meaning, narrative abstractions tell a story, and cinematic *Stimmung* overrides conventional plot. In *Mulholland Drive*, mood-cueing is no longer a background feature guiding our engagement with characters, but a quasi-independent element within the cinematic world. Mood becomes autonomous, taking on a primary rather than a supporting role in the composition of the fictional world (the 'Lynchian world'). Although disclosive, episodic and transitional moods are also a feature of Wong's *In the Mood for Love*, such sequences saturate the narrative presentation but do not quite substitute for it. They orient us affectively and emotionally within the fictional world but do not overwhelm the dramatic articulation or dynamic of the story. In the case of Lynch's films, however, we find precisely such an overflowing or saturation of narrative elements in charged mood sequences that take on an aesthetic life of their own. The frequently remarked oneiric qualities of Lynch's films, with their memorable performance interludes (the Sandman sequence in *Blue Velvet* [1986], the Mystery Man sequence in *Lost Highway* [1997] or the Club Silencio sequence in *Mulholland Drive*) are better understood in this light – namely as involving autonomous or enveloping mood-sequences.

We might consider, as an example of autonomous mood, *Mulholland Drive*'s famous Club Silencio sequence. Betty (Naomi Watts) and Rita (Laura Elena Harring), their romantic

passion for each other now consummated, receive a subconscious message directing them to the mysterious Club Silencio. (Recalling the famous shot of fused faces from *Persona* [Ingmar Bergman, 1966], Rita emerges from a dreamlike trance, eyes staring into the darkness, chanting 'Silencio!' over and over again in an eerie monotone.) After a disorienting cab drive, city lights swirling and the visual frame shuddering, they arrive together at the Club, a kind of oneiric cabaret theatre, the images of its interior saturated with deep reds, flashing lights and plumes of mysterious smoke. The performance that Betty and Rita await is introduced by a magician-like compere/director (Geno Silva), who announces to the audience (in both diegetic and extradiegetic theatres) that what they are seeing and hearing is an illusion. Betty and Rita listen, captivated, to an aching Spanish rendition of Roy Orbison's song 'Crying'. This stunning performance, however, turns out to be mimed; the singer (Rebekka del Rio), her face held in closeup against a dark background, a single painted tear upon her cheek, collapses suddenly during her performance and 'dies' on stage. Despite her collapse, her disembodied voice soars ever higher, ending in a powerful crescendo, as the performer's body is dragged off stage. This extraordinary mood-evoking performance, however, communicates an affective understanding to both characters and viewers: that we are witnessing a performance while in the grip of cinematic fantasy; and that the characters' fantasized love affair is not real but illusory. Betty soon intuits the meaning of the staged performance, the illusory nature of her fantasized love affair with Rita, as well as the dreadful hint that their love will end in death – her body shakes uncontrollably as this intuitive understanding takes hold of her (figure 6). She reaches for a mysterious blue key in her handbag, realizing that this is the key to the mystery that entwines her with the beautiful amnesiac Rita – named after Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) – a traumatized femme fatale whose dark past is slowly returning to consciousness. Following this aesthetic revelation, the two women rush back to Betty's aunt's apartment to discover what mystery this key unlocks.

Fig. 6.



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Rita (Laura Elena Harring) and Betty (Naomi Watts) in Club Silencio in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2002).

This extraordinary fusion of affective, intuitive and reflective dimensions of mood, combining visceral affect, performance, emotional recognition and metacinematic reflection, goes well beyond any discrete narrative function or supplementary evocation of *Stimmung*. The Club Silencio sequence does not simply establish a fictional world or refresh our emotional responsiveness; nor does it serve a primary narrative purpose, guiding us to the key to the mystery (which remains as enigmatic and undecidable as before). Rather, it has become a liberated dimension of expression, an autonomous mood sequence no longer subordinated to narrative ends, one expressive of a multitude of affective and reflective dimensions. More intellectualist or rationalist approaches to film narrative and emotional engagement (certain cognitivist approaches, for example) tend to overlook or underplay Lynch's aesthetics of mood: an art of cinematic composition involving music, song, sound, colour, visual patterning, gesture and performance. Yet such autonomous or enveloping moods clearly play an essential role in our experience of, and engagement with, Lynch's work.

I have explored these memorable mood sequences from four recent films in order to show the variety of ways in which moods can open up, sustain, modulate and transfigure particular cinematic worlds. Without the phenomenological disclosure and expression of these worlds through specific moods we could not become affectively immersed within, responsive to, or able to comprehend the narrative episodes that unfold within them. Far from being a minor aspect of emotional engagement, the evocation and elaboration of moods is essential to our experience of narrative film. A phenomenological perspective is more attuned to capturing mood than cognitivist or other approaches, which tend to reduce mood to emotional engagement and the understanding of narrative content. As a consequence, the aesthetic phenomenon of mood and stylistic practices of mood-sequencing (disclosive, episodic, transitional and autonomous moods) have been unjustly ignored. One reason for this might be that the persistent suspicion concerning film aesthetics – reflecting the philosophical disenfranchisement of film more generally – ignores or devalues questions of style, visual presentation and aesthetic response in favour of narrative analysis and theoretical reflection on the representational and cognitive dimensions of film. Indeed, the aesthetics of film, especially within contemporary philosophy, appear increasingly to have been recast as a naturalistic inquiry into the psychophysiology of cognitive engagement. This cognitivist turn, however, risks losing sight of the manner in which style is essential to the experience of a film, and the experience of its meaning. As in all good film philosophy, it is films themselves that invite

us to experience and reflect upon what I have described as the aesthetics of mood. Moods express qualitative characteristics of a cinematic world, disclosing relevant aspects of that world in an affective and reflective manner. They orient the viewer within the film's fictional world, eliciting and modulating our emotional responses, and thereby contributing to the expression of meaning through cinematic style. Without the expression of cinematic mood, which is essential to realizing a fictional world, we could not appreciate or be moved by the art of narrative film.

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